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**MAYOR LIGHTFOOT LAUNCHES CHICAGO DIGITAL EQUITY COUNCIL**

*New community-driven council seeks to dismantle the digital divide and increase access to internet citywide*

Today, Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot announced the launch of the Chicago Digital Equity Council, a cross-sector, community-driven effort to understand and tackle the nuanced barriers to digital equity and close Chicago's digital divide once and for all.

Chicago's digital divide is a racial equity issue. As many as 20% of Chicago households are without internet, and over 12% don't have computers. Communities with the lowest connectivity rates are over 90% Black on average, with median household incomes averaging less than \$27,000. Through a comprehensive community engagement strategy, the Digital Equity Council will make recommendations to close this gap, reaching a state of digital equity where all Chicagoans have the digital skills, tools, and resources they need to fully participate in society, democracy, and the economy.

"Since the beginning of my administration, one of my highest priorities has been to give residents the tools they need to achieve their full potential," said Mayor Lightfoot. "That's why we have mobilized City funding to close the digital divide and improve internet access in our most vulnerable communities. Closing gaps in access to technology and learning tools will have a positive impact across our entire city and will support the next generation of digitally empowered Chicagoans."

The Digital Equity Council was born out of Chicago Connected, a first-of-its-kind broadband program that has connected over 64,000 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students to at-home high-speed internet and made free digital learning resources available to families. The Digital Equity Council will build upon Chicago Connected's historic progress in the K-12 space to pinpoint and tackle the barriers to digital equity Chicago residents face citywide.

Mobilizing the Mayor's Chicago Recovery Plan and utilizing historic investment in broadband in President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the City of Chicago is dedicating unprecedented resources to closing the digital divide and addressing the



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lasting repercussions the COVID-19 pandemic has had on Chicago's most vulnerable communities.

"Equity is both an outcome and a process that results in fair and just access to opportunity and resources that provide everyone with the ability to thrive," said Candace Moore, City of Chicago's Chief Equity Officer. "In order to solve a systemic issue like access to affordable internet, it is essential to partner with community members who are most impacted. I'm excited by the diverse expertise on the Digital Equity Council and am confident they will help lead our city to a more equitable future."

"Far too many Americans, especially Black Americans, remain on the wrong side of the digital divide. From the West Side to the South Side, and all-around Chicago, this leaves them unable to fully participate in our modern society, including the many professional, educational, health, and social opportunities that the Internet offers," said Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Commissioner Geoffrey Starks. "I firmly support Mayor Lightfoot's efforts to create a community-driven effort to eradicate this challenge. We know that community is one of the strongest sources of trusted information about the many programs currently available to help drive digital equity, including the Federal Communications Commission's Affordable Connectivity Program."

The Digital Equity Council is led by a group of community leaders, community-based organizations (CBOs), government entities, and digital equity subject matter experts. Known as the Guiding Team, this cross-sector leadership group is working to reimagine the relationships among people, programs, and organizations to achieve systemic change. With representation from communities across the City, this team ensures that Chicagoans most burdened by the digital divide are at the table and centered in decision-making.

"The gap in digital resources, such as quality Internet, computers, and learning tools, creates growing disadvantages for families who are low-income and experience language barriers in my community," said Karina Aguilar, a community leader on the Digital Equity Council Guiding Team. "As a Spanish-speaking immigrant, I had to teach myself how to navigate technology to support my five CPS students, especially my special needs son who requires a device to communicate throughout the day. Now, I work to support Spanish-speaking parents who are learning how to use email, create a resume on Microsoft Word, or use social media to communicate with loved ones."

Over the next six months, the Digital Equity Council will be facilitating a series of Community Conversations. Conversations will focus on 1) Barriers to Digital Equity,



2) Community Assets and Digital Equity Resources, and 3) Co-creating Solutions to Achieve Digital Equity.

"Reliable internet service is essential for many aspects of engaging in today's world, including accessing educational resources, searching for jobs, and accessing critical online services such as telehealth. Yet many of our low and moderate income clients lack quality internet service," said Karen Freeman-Wilson, President and CEO of the Chicago Urban League. "That's why we are excited about the City's commitment to addressing the digital divide with the launch of the Digital Equity Council."

The work of the Digital Equity Council will be focused in areas of the City with the lowest rates of at-home internet connectivity, but there will be opportunities to share experiences, perspectives and ideas citywide through both digital and in-person / paper-based channels to ensure participation is accessible for all. Events will be offered in English and Spanish.

"Equity, inclusion, and lifelong learning opportunities are at the heart of Chicago Public Library's mission," said Chicago Public Library Commissioner Chris Brown. "As the City's largest provider of free broadband, we extend digital access to every age group in every neighborhood in Chicago. That's why CPL is proud to be part of the City's Digital Equity Council, and our collective effort to mobilize resources towards bridging the digital divide."

The City recognizes the importance of collaborating across sectors to ensure investments, programs, and policy are coordinated and build upon the community work already in motion. As such, the work of the Digital Equity Council will culminate in a digital equity roadmap, advising efforts across the digital equity ecosystem. The DEC will also advise on how to institutionalize an ongoing digital equity coalition to ensure closing the digital divide remains a top priority for government, the private sector, and direct service providers alike.

"I'm excited to join Mayor Lightfoot as she announces the Digital Equity Council, a community-driven effort to address the barriers to digital equity citywide," said Alderman Michael Scott Jr., Chairman of the Committee on Education and Child Development. "My top priority as Alderman is to make sure my residents have access to every tool they need to grow and thrive."

"Digital inclusion coalitions across the country have responded to the triple challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, growing economic inequality, and racial injustice facing poor communities and communities of color without access to broadband internet at home," said Adrienne B. Furniss, executive director of the Illinois-based Benton Institute for Broadband & Society. "We are thrilled that the City



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of Chicago is building on its impactful efforts to date and continuing to prioritize equitable access to affordable broadband with an emphasis on low-income, unserved, and underserved populations. Combining access, affordability, and digital skills training will empower users to make the most of their broadband connections and help ensure that individuals and communities in the city of Chicago will have the tools they need for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy.”

To stay up to date on the Chicago Digital Equity Council and sign up for upcoming Community Conversations, visit [chicago.gov/digitalequity](https://chicago.gov/digitalequity).

For more information on Chicago Connected, and to check if your family is eligible for no-cost internet, visit [cps.edu/chicagoconnected](https://cps.edu/chicagoconnected).

For free digital learning resources, visit [cps.edu/digitallearning](https://cps.edu/digitallearning).

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